

WHAT WAS USED FOR PAYMENT IN EARLY POLAND?

Fig. 1
In the time of Mieszko I, the
primary currency was the
Arab dirham. A 10th-century
hoard from Kalisz-Piwonice



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The small silver coins of the early Piast state were both a means of payment and a symbol of Bolesław the Brave's ambitions.

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The newly formed state of the first Piasts faced numerous civilizational challenges. One of them was regulating payments for goods and services. During the reign of Mieszko I, no coins were yet minted on Polish lands.

Long-distance trade, Arab silver, and slaves

At that time, only foreign coins were in use, reaching the lands along the Oder and Vistula primarily thanks to lively trade activity. Chief among them were silver Arab coins known as dirhams (Fig. 1). They appeared in small quantities along the Baltic coast as early as the early ninth century and became widespread in Poland and other parts of northern, central, and eastern Europe during the tenth century. Most are known from archaeological finds, though the Arab traveler Ibrahim ibn Yaqub also mentioned them after seeing them at the imperial court in Mainz.

In the tenth century, silver served many purposes – as a repository of value, a means of exchange, and a tool of power. Dukes paid their troops in silver and used it to fund the construction of strongholds and infrastructure. Recent research suggests that Arab dirhams arrived in Polish lands through trade – with exports from Poland to the Orient including furs, honey, and local goods, but above all slaves. All indications are that the early Piasts raided neighboring peoples to acquire resources to consolidate their power (evidenced by destruction in peripheral strongholds of Greater Poland in the early tenth century) and sold captives into slavery in exchange for large quantities of eastern silver.

However, dirhams in Poland were not counted as individual coins but valued by weight – hence most are found today in small pieces. This practice may be referenced in Ibrahim ibn Yaqub's account of Poland in Mieszko I's time. The traveler from Tortosa wrote:

"Tax [or fee] collections [charged by Mieszko] are weights. They are a ration of his men [or infantrymen] every month" (trans. M. Pinker). It appears these "market weights" (*al-matakil al-markatija*) were in fact silver scrap – cut coins and ornaments exchanged by weight.

Because silver was relatively valuable at the time (about 0.2 g of silver – one-tenth of a coin – could buy a day's worth of food for an adult man), other items also functioned as currency: iron, salt, glass beads, grain, and even the "linen handkerchiefs" mentioned by Ibrahim ibn Yaqub. Recent research indicates that this so-called "object-money" was not a primitive form of payment but complemented silver coinage. Starting in the 970s, western European coins – mainly Bavarian and Saxon denars – began to circulate alongside dirhams. In the following decades, these were joined by other coin types: German, Byzantine, English, Czech, Hungarian, and Scandinavian.

In the early eleventh century, an important shift occurred – coin finds contain fewer fragments and an increasing number of whole coins. This change is linked to the introduction of coinage as a proper means of payment, where the monetary value of an intact coin exceeded the value of the silver it contained. Such a system was clearly enforced by the state and its fiscal policies. While this process of "monetization" did not necessarily require the minting of domestic coinage (it was enough for the ruler to demand that transactions be conducted in coin), having one's own mint undeniably enhanced the ruler's prestige and generated revenue.

Who minted the first Polish coins?

So when was the first Polish coin struck? Ever since the time of Joachim Lelewel, the founding figure of Polish and European numismatics, it was believed that Mieszko I was to be credited. In fact, today's 10-złoty banknote features Mieszko I alongside a coin bearing the name MISICO. However, detailed studies have shown that these denars were minted much later. The archaeological record clearly indicates that the "Mieszko" named on these coins was not Bolesław's father, but rather his son – Mieszko II Lambert. Inter-

estingly, these coins began to be produced during Bolesław's lifetime, while Mieszko II was still heir to the throne.

So which Polish coin *is* the oldest? Although it cannot be determined with full certainty, one strong candidate is a denar known from just two specimens, found near Kalisz and Koszalin. One side shows a tree of life with an arrow, along with the inscription BOLIZLAVO DVX (Fig. 2); the other bears a patriarchal cross, a Byzantine symbol more likely derived from Danish coinage. This type was likely struck around 992.

Several other types appeared before the end of the tenth century: one showing a frontal bust, and another bearing the name of Saint Wenceslaus – whom Bolesław the Brave promoted as a patron saint of the Polish state and a Slavic martyr, at least until the death of Bishop Adalbert in 997. Around the same time, a large series of German-style imitations appeared with the name “Poznań” inscribed. The final type in the known tenth-century series includes one of the rarest Polish numismatic pieces: a denar with the inscription GNEZDVN CIVITAS (Fig. 3), most likely minted for the famous Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000.

A total of around 25 different types of coins have been attributed to the mints of Bolesław the Brave. These fall into two main categories. The first includes coins bearing the prince's name or other unmistakable references to Poland, such as the names of Poznań, Gniezno, or Mogilno. The best-known example is the denar inscribed PRINCES POLONIE (Fig. 4), which appears on today's 20-złoty banknote. The second group consists of numerous imitative issues that do not mention the Polish ruler. These coins bear either the names of foreign rulers (such as Otto, Adelaide, Vladivoj, or Æthelred – Fig. 5) or completely blundered (garbled or nonsensical) inscriptions. However, die-link studies confirm that these were minted in Bolesław's workshops. Mints often reused dies from different sets, producing so-called hybrids – coins struck using mismatched dies from distinct types.

Currency or statement of power?

A defining feature of early Piast coinage is its remarkable stylistic diversity. The coins of Bolesław the Brave frequently imitated foreign models – German, Czech, Rus'-Byzantine, Danish, and English. But there were also entirely original designs with local iconography. The quality of workmanship varied greatly. Some coins (such as the denar proudly bearing the title REX – Fig. 6) are, to put it mildly, crude and likely the work of an unskilled engraver. Others, by contrast, reflect a high degree of expertise – like the Rus'-style denar with a Cyrillic inscription БОЛЕСЛАВЪ



(Fig. 7), showing the ruler in a frontal bust with his hand raised in a gesture of authority.

The mixing of dies – common in early medieval mints – was just one symptom of the broader disorder that characterized the earliest Polish coinage, especially from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Coin production was often interrupted for years, during which time the dies would corrode. When minting resumed, damaged dies were sometimes reused and re-engraved. In one such case, a peacock on a PRINCES POLONIE denar was accidentally given a third leg, and the inscription degenerated into a string of meaningless pseudo-letters. The sheer variety of coin types and iconography, the widely varying technical quality, the production gaps, the proliferation of hybrids, and the abundance of anonymous

Fig. 2
One of the oldest Polish coins, from 992–995 – a denar of Bolesław the Brave featuring an arrow

Fig. 3
Denar of Bolesław the Brave with the inscription GNEZDVN CIVITAS – most likely minted to commemorate the Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000

Fig. 4
The earliest preserved written form of the name “Poland” – a denar of Bolesław the Brave with the inscription PRINCES POLONIE and a peacock symbolizing Christ

imitations all suggest that Bolesław the Brave did not treat minting as a high priority.

Today, around 400 coins from his reign are known, and the total output is estimated at 300,000–500,000 pieces – a minuscule figure compared to the roughly

50 million Samanid dirhams imported into Europe during the 10th century. Added to this were vast German issues and substantial Czech, English, Hungarian, and Scandinavian emissions. By comparison, the earliest Polish coinage played only a marginal role in Central European monetary circulation. As a Christian ruler, Bolesław introduced coinage to his state – a hallmark of civilization – but the limited economic benefits seem not to have justified a more consistent and organized production. Some change is evident in the second decade of the eleventh century, with the appearance of a “corrected” version of PRINCES POLONIE and a significant increase in imitative coinage, which was far more numerous than the earlier, symbolic issues. At the same time, relatively large numbers of coins issued by the heir to the throne, Mieszko II, began to appear (Fig. 8).

It is tempting to speculate that Mieszko II – an educated prince familiar with German politics and economics who, after his 1013 marriage to Richeza, received a duchy of his own – sought to bring order to his father’s coinage system and turn it into a source of stable revenue. But if so, why did he not continue minting coins during his own independent reign? This and many other questions about the beginnings of Polish coinage remain unanswered.

Coins as sources of historical knowledge

The study of hoards and coins from the early Piast state is about much more than neatly arranging typologies of the oldest Polish coinages to illustrate textbook covers. Coins are among the most versatile historical sources – being archaeological, written, and iconographic at once. Due to their mass production, they are also an excellent tool for scrutinizing the development of the economy, production systems, trade routes, and settlement networks. By analyzing coinage and the circulation of silver, we can reconstruct connections between trade centers and identify periods of economic growth or stagnation in the pre-industrial era. Coin production clearly reflects the organization of state institutions. At times, we see only a few large, centrally run mints producing high-volume issues for the entire realm; at others, numerous small workshops strike short series for local use.

Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the core of numismatic research has changed little: it still relies on expert knowledge, classification, and analysis of finds. Yet today’s field of numismatics also embraces cutting-edge technology – statistical analysis (Big Data), spatial analysis (GIS), and the study of feature interdependence are now all standard. Physical and chemical analyses have become essential as well,



Fig. 5
Denar of Bolesław the Brave
imitating English pennies
of Æthelred II (Warsaw Centre
of Numismatics)



Fig. 6
Uniface denar of Bolesław
the Brave with the inscription
REX



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especially those conducted at the Bio- and Archeometry Laboratory at the PAS Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, using state-of-the-art tools like scanning electron microscopes with energy-dispersive spectroscopy (Fig. 9). These methods are fundamental for analyzing pre-industrial coinages, allowing us to detect differences in the metal composition of various issues – from ancient to early modern coins.

Such research helps determine the source of raw materials and reveals shifts in minting and fiscal policy, as rulers routinely manipulated the silver content of coins by raising or lowering it in cycles. In the early days of Polish coinage, silver was of high quality. But just a few decades later, under Bolesław the Bold and Władysław Herman, the silver content dropped significantly. Advanced lab-testing is thus crucial for understanding the coinage of the late eleventh century. Alongside princely and royal coins, large volumes of anonymous “cross denars” circulated in Poland – some minted in Saxony, others locally. Studying major hoards of these coins – each sometimes containing thousands or even tens of thousands of pieces – remains a major challenge for Polish scholarship.

From its inception, the Polish Academy of Sciences has been a leading institution in the study of medieval coinage in Poland and Europe. At the Institute of



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History PAS, Prof. Ryszard Kiersnowski – a pioneer of modern European numismatics – researched the role of money in medieval culture. At the PAS Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Prof. Stanisław Suchodolski has been conducting groundbreaking work on the earliest Polish and European coinage for more than half a century. Today, the Institute continues this legacy, with its numismatics team carrying out broad studies of early medieval Polish and European coinage – including Oriental, German, Scandinavian, and Carolingian coins. ■

Fig. 8
Denar of Mieszko II Lambert
as heir to the throne



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Fig. 9
Analyzing the chemical
composition of coins is an
essential part of modern
numismatic research